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The Representation of Victimhood in Sofi Oksanen's Novel *Purge*

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Abstract

Finnish-Estonian author Sofi Oksanen's novel *Purge* (2008) explores one woman's experience of political violence and its repercussions in Estonia from the 1930s to the 1990s. The novel's reception in Estonia included accusations that the text painted a simplified version of history, setting 'good' Estonian victims against 'bad' Russian perpetrators. However, a close reading of the text shows a much more complex and subtle representation of victimhood, which challenges such dichotomies. Seen in the context of current scholarly debates about the meaning of victimhood in contemporary society, the novel offers a warning against the contemporary nationalist tendency to found political community on a shared experience of suffering or persecution which excludes others, pointing instead to the creation of solidarities among different kinds of victims, which potentially transcend national boundaries.

Keywords

victimhood, memory, communism, National Socialism, Estonia, Finnish literature

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Introduction

Finnish-Estonian author Sofi Oksanen's novel *Purge* (2008), based on her earlier play of the same name, has been widely translated and has been the subject of positive reception both in Finland itself and in the rest of Europe and the United States. The novel focuses on the suffering of three generations of Estonian women against a background of political change from the 1930s to the 1990s. The novel's focus on continuities of female suffering in different historical contexts marks it out as a feminist text. However, in this article I will argue that the novel can also be read as a meditation on the function of suffering in the construction of political community, particular of the national variety. Iain Wilkinson has suggested that human suffering always 'takes place within a cultural struggle to constitute our lives with positive meaning' (Wilkinson, 2004: 41). Such 'positive meaning' takes place at a collective level, in which groups and societies stake a claim to shared values and shared understandings both of themselves and their relationship to others in terms of the significance they invest in past suffering, particularly in terms of their conception of the victim of historical injustice as a key figure in their construction of political community. As I will argue below, Oksanen's

Purge is of interest precisely because of the critical way in which it questions this process, especially when applied to the context of post-communist Estonia, pointing towards alternative forms of solidarity which transcend the national community conceived as a community of victims.

Oksanen's novel focuses primarily on the lives of Aliide Truu, an Estonian peasant woman, and her great-niece Zara Pekk. Aliide's story is related from 1936, that is to say towards the end of Estonia's brief period of independence, whereas Zara's story is told from 1991 onwards. Both of the women suffer sexual violence: Aliide during interrogations by the secret police in the Estonian Soviet Republic (ESSR) in the early post-war period, Zara at the hands of a Russian pimp who forces her into sexual slavery in Germany following the collapse of communism. Zara and Aliide meet for the first time in the early 1990s, as Zara tries to escape from her persecutor, making her way back to her mother's and grandmother's home village, from which they were banished to Vladivostock in 1949 for alleged crimes against socialism. As we later learn, this banishment, although part of a wave of historic deportations in March of that year, was also the result of a denunciation by Aliide herself, who was by then married to a committed communist, Martin Truu. The chief cause of Aliide's hatred for her sister Ingel, who later becomes Zara's grandmother, is the latter's marriage to Hans Pekk, the only man Aliide is able to love. Hans is a member of the anti-Soviet partisan group the Forest Brothers, and briefly fights on the German side as Hitler's *Wehrmacht* enters

Estonia to drive out Soviet forces in 1941. Later, he returns to his village, and is hidden by Aliide and Ingel in a secret room in their house. Following Ingel's deportation with her daughter, Linda, Aliide continues to live in the family house with her husband, Martin, while still concealing Hans. Eventually, however, it becomes clear to her that Hans will never love her and, when he dangerously begins to lose control of himself, Aliide drugs and smothers him. Years later, when Zara returns to the village and seeks Aliide's protection from her Russian pimp, Pasha, and his henchman, former KGB officer Lavrenti, Aliide once more turns to violence, shooting both men and giving the money they are carrying to Zara so that she can escape home to Vladivostok. Aliide herself plans to burn the house with herself in it.

As the summary above demonstrates, this is novel full of incident and drama, arguably even melodramatic in its construction. In part due to these features, the novel's positive reception outside of Estonia was followed by widespread and controversial debate in the national press once the Estonian translation was published. As Eneken Laanes has observed, the criticisms of the book inside Estonia focused on three key areas: Firstly, that the book presented an overly dark portrayal of Estonia under state socialism *per se* (a curious charge given that the book only really deals with the ESSR until the early 1950s); Secondly, that it was calculated to appeal to an international market with its allegedly salacious portrayals of sexual violence, and by use of a popular thriller format (a comparison with Dan Brown was drawn by one critic);

Thirdly, that it pushed an anti-Russian agenda by portraying a black-and-white division between Soviet ‘baddies’ and Estonian ‘goodies’, appealing to a nationalist agenda both in Estonia itself and in the author’s native Finland (Laanes, 2012: 20).

In order to investigate Oksanen’s portrayal of victimhood, I will conduct a close reading of the text, triangulating my analysis both with the criticisms put forward in the Estonian debate on the book, and with a growing literature on the significance of the figure of the victim in the politics of memory and in contemporary culture more generally. My argument about Oksanen’s novel will be that, in exploiting the conventions of popular literature with its melodramatic plot twists, coincidences and portrayals of extremes of experience, the text is able to engage in complex portrayals of victimhood and suffering which undermine those very black-and-white distinctions which its critics claim to identify. Rather than drawing clear lines between victims and perpetrators, particularly as this applies to Estonia between the 1930s and the 1950s, Oksanen’s text can be read as challenging contemporary instrumentalisations of victimhood, especially as they apply to the legacy of communism in Europe.

The Meaning of Victimhood

Before engaging in a reading of *Purge*, it is necessary to interrogate our contemporary understanding of what it means to have been the victim of political violence – whether

in the form of human rights abuses, war crimes or even genocide – and of the duty of others to remember that victimhood – for example, through compensation, rehabilitation, or memorialisation – can be traced back to the emergence of a number of trends in the 1970s. The post-1968 period saw the emergence of social movements in the West whose focus was the suffering of particular social groups, for example women or homosexuals. The claim to membership of a persecuted minority group became both the potential source of a shared identity, which could galvanise resistance to oppression, and also a powerful political demand to state and society for the removal of the conditions of oppression. This trope is today so well-established that we see groups who oppose these very same demands for liberation seeking to adopt victim status: So, conservative Christians who actively oppose equal rights for homosexuals or the right to choose for women cast themselves as an ‘oppressed minority’, persecuted not just because of their beliefs, but because of who they are. This development highlights the key difference which the notion of victimhood makes between human suffering in general and victim status in particular. Historically speaking, it is only a relatively recent development that human beings have perceived their suffering as the outcome of a particular social order or of a political power which could be modified or overthrown. As Joseph A. Amato argues, modernity is characterised by a belief that happiness and well-being are both attainable and to be expected (Amato, 1990: xix). Thus, by implication, suffering comes to seem anomalous and in need of remedy. The social

movements which often support and, in some cases, are founded in the claim to victim status can therefore be regarded as quintessentially modern phenomena, products of societies which, as Dieter Rucht (2004) puts it, come to see human action as having the potential to re-order social existence for the better, as opposed to attributing that order to a divine and unchangeable will.

The 1970s also saw the emergence of a human rights agenda in national and international politics. As détente between the two super powers began to falter in the middle of the decade, the denial of human rights to citizens of state socialist countries became a means for the West to apply pressure to the Soviet Union and its satellite states, often supported by emerging human rights NGOs, and indeed by dissidents within those countries who adopted a human rights agenda in challenging the legitimacy of communist governments (Moyn, 2010: 121–75) . The suffering of those imprisoned and persecuted by these governments became a powerful symbol of their lack of legitimacy and their claim to represent a more humane form of social organisation. At the opposite end of the political spectrum, human rights activists in Latin American countries and their supporters abroad increasingly used the publicisation of human rights abuses under ring-wing authoritarian regimes in a similar fashion. This is not to say that the notion of human rights, which emerged in the aftermath of the Second World War, was invented at this point in time; only that, as Moyn has argued, it was in the 1970s that the belief that sovereign states could be held to account by the

international community for their breaches of human rights gained currency (Moyn, 2010: 212). As Paige Arthur observes in the case of Latin America, once the regimes in question had fallen, human rights activists at the national level could continue to assert their relevance to the political process by framing themselves as defenders of the memory of persecution, with the figure of the victim of the now defunct dictatorship acting as a kind of guarantor of the new democratic order (2009: 334-35). The notion of transitional justice, which gained significant attention in this context, is an expression of the belief that the suffering of the victims must be addressed in order for the new society to flourish: Their suffering has by no means come to an end simply because the cause (the previous dictatorship) has been removed. This is not to suggest, however, that such claims to victimhood go unchallenged. As James Mark's analysis of central and eastern European countries after the demise of state socialism demonstrates, recognition of victim status and measures to address that status can be patchy and uneven, depending on national political conditions (Mark, 2010).

The construction of victimhood as a form of continued suffering which demands redress beyond the removal of the political system which caused it can also be seen in the context of the development of the diagnosis of trauma in the late 20th century. As Didier Fassin and Richard Reitman have argued, in the post-war period, psychiatric symptoms of trauma have increasingly become associated with the status of the victim, to the extent that psychiatrists are now asked to attest to such symptoms in order to

‘prove’ that an individual has been subjected to violent treatment, especially in the case of asylum seekers (Fassin and Rechtman, 2009). In other words, to be perceived as a ‘victim’ worthy of protection and redress, there is an assumption that the violence inflicted must have left psychological scars of a particular kind which come to stand in for the violence itself. By implication, then, someone who was violently attacked, and who was in danger of suffering similar treatment again, only really becomes a victim when they have they display typically victim-like symptoms of trauma: Trauma and victimhood become more or less interchangeable. However, the notion of trauma also expresses a continued demand for action on the part of the state and society. It is a way of expressing the fact that victims still suffer after the cause of the original persecution is removed and that others have a moral obligation to put in place measures which would in some way address that continued suffering, particularly by offering material support and social recognition.

The assumption of the victim’s ongoing suffering (connoted as trauma) and the importance of addressing their needs in political terms (demonstrating commitment to democracy and human rights) find their most compelling expression in the figure of the Holocaust victim. The duty to remember the Holocaust and its victims, both those who survived the horror and those who did not, increasingly became a focus of attention in Western Europe and the United States following the Eichmann trial in the early 1960s, which gave prominence to survivor testimony above and beyond the need to establish

the nature of Eichmann's administrative activities. As Annette Wieviorka has observed (2006: 56), the Eichmann trial initiates the 'era of witness', in which the Holocaust survivor in particular offer a point of moral orientation for the contemporary world. By remembering their suffering in various ways, societies not only attempt to address their continued traumatic suffering, but also demonstrate their commitment to the lessons of that suffering in terms of the values of democracy and human rights. In a similar vein, Erica Bouris argues that the conception of victimhood which emerges from the context of the Holocaust is that of the 'moral beacon' (2007: 32). In other words, in order for victims to achieve recognition, it is often assumed that they must be portrayed as moral paragons as opposed to complex human beings. As a consequence, in debates over victimhood, commentators often set very high standards for the recognition of victim status. So, for example, there are those who, like John Elster, argue that it is not permissible to speak of particular victims in the context of state socialism, since all citizens were to a greater or lesser extent complicit in the system (Elster, 2004: 109–110). As Bettina Greiner has pointed out in the context of the legacy of state socialism in Germany, this insistence on the 'purity' of victims can have the negative effect of making those who suffered under socialist regimes unwilling to acknowledge the implication of their nations in fascism and the suffering of that previous system's victims (Greiner, 2006). Greiner's analysis might equally be extended to a number of former socialist states in Eastern and Central Europe.

This standard of absolute victimhood is problematic in terms of the criteria it sets for recognising victimhood in other contexts, since it is likely to blind us to real suffering where a norm of moral purity is not deemed to have been met, and may also make those involved in conflicts much less willing to acknowledge their own misdeeds because they want to attain for themselves the prestige position of the morally pure victim. Furthermore, the notion of the victim as 'moral beacon' can also make it more difficult to see the very nature of the evil which creates the victims' suffering in the first place. Primo Levi, for example, was particularly strident in rejecting the notion that the Holocaust victim was in any way 'sanctified' by their experience. Rather, he argues, the concentration camp system tended to 'degrade' victims by placing them in a situation where they could no longer maintain their 'moral armature' (1989: 25). The brutality of the camps was such that victims were forced to make moral choices that, in other circumstances, they would have found appalling. In particular, Levi states, they are left with a sense of 'shame' for having omitted to help those weaker than themselves at the expense of their own survival (1989: 59). That shame is a key element of the concentration camp experience for Levi, which he does not wish to see forgotten.

The importance of presenting the 'impure' victim, rather than a sanitised version of the victim as moral paragon, may well pre-date the Holocaust, however. For example, in her analysis of Linda Brent's autobiographical account of life as a black slave in the American South, Elisabeth V. Spelman, points out the difficulty Brent consciously faces

when relating her sexual exploitation by white men. On the one hand, Brent portrays her suffering with a particular political intent, that is to provoke outrage against the slavery system. On the other, however, she realises that to fully express the horror of that system she will have to talk about the way in which its degradation of her forced her to abandon her own moral standards and sleep with powerful white men to gain a minimal form of protection from worse treatment. She realises, Spelman points out, that this may lessen potential identification with her on the part of her audience, whose circumstances do not force them into such compromises (1997: 73-82). At the same time, Spelman argues, by refusing to present herself as a 'pure' victim, Brent also asserts her moral agency as someone who was still in a position to choose, even if the choice made was not one she can be proud of. By doing so, she maintains her status as the 'moral equal' of her reader (1997: 74): She is not merely a passive victim, but a moral agent forced to make choices in a horrific situation. A similar case could be made for Levi's account. Although he makes clear that it was part of the horror of the concentration camp system that it placed him in the position of having to choose between self-preservation and solidarity, he also remembers that he did sometimes offer comfort to others, while at other times he did not. The fact that he describes the emotion associated with memories of not having helped as shameful indicates that he still feels that there was a choice involved: His shame is the feeling of not having lived up to what he believes to be his true moral standards.

The accounts of victimhood offered by Brent and Levi suggest that the notion of the 'pure' victim as 'moral beacon' may be problematic, in that it conceals from us the full magnitude of the crimes committed against victims in the context of slavery and the concentration camp system respectively. The morally 'pure' victim is simultaneously robbed of their moral agency and of a key aspect of their suffering, namely the agony of having to make moral choices under conditions of extreme oppression. It is possible to see an analogous danger where the condition of victim is extrapolated from the individual to the group level. Diane Enns has argued, for instance, that the conferment a morally pure status on victim groups, be they ethnic or national, has the deleterious effect of not only precluding any consideration of their moral judgements in the past, but also in the future. Drawing on the work of Hannah Arendt, Enns suggests that the assigning of a victim status to groups, which is assumed to continue into the future by virtue of the traumatic legacy of the past, effectively removes them from co-responsibility from shaping that future (2012: 92), since they are unable to reflect on their own moral choices in that future. Placed in the role of victim, groups can only see themselves in terms of the recognition or non-recognition of that status, its non-recognition being coterminous with a repetition of the violence they previously suffered. Particularly in situations where more than one group claims victim status, this leads to an inability to recognise the losses of others in which one may oneself have been complicit, since to do so would be to give up one's own privileged position as 'pure'

victim. At the same time, those who adopt the victim role may be unable to reflect upon their own actions in defence of their victimised selves. Enns' argument is that the role of the victim, as we have come to understand it, precludes moral judgement both on the part of those who have suffered themselves and of them by others, which works against both a nuanced understanding of conflict and an ability to judge the wrongs and the harms on all sides (2012: 115). One might also add, as David Bruce Macdonald has demonstrated in his analysis of propaganda during the conflicts in the former Yugoslavia, that the power of the victim role is now such that it can also be cynically manipulated by objective aggressors in order to portray those they persecute on national or ethnic grounds as the real victimisers, against whom they are forced to defend themselves (2002). The logic here is that, once one has discursively constructed oneself in the role of the victim, it is impossible for anyone to question one's actions, since one is *a priori* morally pure. Not only this, but, as Tzvetan Todorov has argued, victim status can also be politically advantageous, in that it limits the possible responses of others to the group's demands: 'Victimhood gives you grounds to complain, to protest, to make demands, and others have to respond, or else cut off relations entirely.' (2003: 143)

An important consequence of these various parallel developments is that political communities today are just as likely to look to experiences of suffering in the past to underpin a sense of collective identity as they might have been in the past to point to experiences of glory or heroism. Victimhood has acquired associations of moral purity

which allow those who identify with this status (or with those who have this status) to assume a position which distinguishes them from those regarded as oppressors or perpetrators, who are seen as incapable of the suffering which is reserved for the victim group. At the same time, the desire to maintain a claim to victim status can lead to an unwillingness to see oneself as morally fallible or even as a subject whose actions are open to moral scrutiny. As Judith Butler has argued in relation to the US reaction to September 11 2001, one of the unfortunate effects of this construction of righteous victimhood, especially as the basis of national community, is a 'dis-identification' with others whose human ability to suffer is not recognised (2004: 143). Instead, the exclusive claim to victim status can lead to a desire for violence against others, which (it is hoped) will re-instate the victim's sense of invulnerability. In opposition to this, Butler proposes that suffering should, instead, be 'mobilized in the service of a politics that seeks to diminish suffering universally, that seeks to recognise the sanctity of life, of all lives', thereby potentially creating new forms of solidarity (2004: 104).

Victimhood in the Estonian Context

As Marek Tamm has argued, before the first Soviet invasion of 1939 and the demise of the Estonian Republic, constructions of Estonian national identity were dominated by a narrative of 'national heroization' centred on the struggle to overcome German

domination (2008: 504). As the grip of the Soviet regime loosened in the late 1980s, nationalist memory activists embraced a narrative of restoration, envisioning a reestablishment of the inter-war republic which would signal an essential continuity with that original struggle for national self-liberation (2008: 505). In the 1990s, however, this heroic discourse was supplemented with an increased attention to the suffering of the Estonian people, whether through mass deportations (Tamm, 2013: 653) or other aspects of Soviet oppression within Estonia itself. Mieke Wulf has argued that, since independence, repression by the Soviet Union has come to dominate Estonian memory, with the German occupation, including its aspects of collaboration and the participation of some Estonians in the Holocaust, only gradually being brought onto the agenda, largely by the state in an attempt to re-align Estonia with a European memory agenda (2010: 251). The founding of a Museum of Occupations (at first privately, but now with state support) in 1993, which emphasises Estonian suffering and tends to elide complicity in the German war effort, was one symptom of this development.

Bernd Giesen notes that victimhood and heroism are in fact compatible features of nationalist ideology, since both experiences, the traumatic and triumphant respectively, can be incorporated into the narrative of collective identity: Victims suffer for the sake of that collective identity and their trauma can be re-interpreted as bestowing upon them a kind of 'triumphant immortality' (2004: 25). This is clearly compatible with the contemporary notion of the victim whose suffering bears a moral

lesson for the present and future. In the case of national victims, that lesson calls upon the next generation to remove the conditions of earlier sufferers' persecution, that is to say to preserve national independence and not let their suffering have been in vain. Furthermore, by recognising the damage done to national victims, 'a society tries to include them again in the community of human beings who [...] are tied to each other by some bond of solidarity in distinction to others' (2004: 48), thereby strengthening the nation's sense of collective identity. In this way, the victim's suffering body can become what Elaine Scarry calls an 'analogical substantiation' of the national community (1985: 147–48). Perpetration, on the other hand, is not compatible with such heroic narratives of the nation, and perpetrators must therefore be recuperated as heroes (Giesen, 2004: 25) so that their crimes do not call into question the moral purity of the nation as oppressed victim.

In the Estonian context, this can be seen in the significant grass-roots support for the honouring of those Estonians who fought on the German side in the Second World War as 'freedom fighters,' a move which ignores the complexity of their collusion in the German war effort and its accompanying crimes against humanity (Wulf, 2010: 261). At the same time, the lines between good victims and heroes, on the one hand, and bad oppressors, on the other, must be neatly maintained, despite the fact that, as Wulf points out, ethnic Estonians also fought on the Soviet side. Again, the Estonia state has come under international pressure to contain celebration of Estonians who fought on the

fascist side as it has become integrated into the EU and NATO (Mark, 2010: 111).

As discussed in the introduction to this article, Sofi Oksanen's novel *Purge* has itself been accused of peddling a version of Estonian history in which the Russians are the perpetrators and the Estonians the innocent victims or noble heroes. What I hope to show by means of a close reading of the text in what follows is that Oksanen actually focuses chiefly on Estonian nationals and explores their complex experience of suffering and complicity in the perpetration of suffering, which cannot be reduced to such a schematisation. At the same time, I will argue, Oksanen's novel has an interest beyond the context of debates over Estonian history, in that it also interrogates the situation of the victim of political violence in order to dispense with the cliché of the victim as 'moral beacon.' Oksanen shows how to be a victim of violence and oppression can equally lead individuals into a defensive de-solidarisation of the kind described by Butler, which can include collusion in the same structures which harmed them. In doing so, Oksanen questions the possibility of founding political community on a sense of shared righteous victimhood, pointing instead to the potential of recognising a shared human (as opposed to merely national) condition of vulnerability and moral fallibility as a way out of violence and isolation, both on the individual and on the national level.

Victimhood in Purge

The central narrative of those sections of *Purge* which deal with Estonia under German and Soviet occupation during the Second World War and its aftermath are dominated by Aliide Truu's love for Estonian nationalist Hans Pekk. The story is, in fact, closely focalised around Aliide's experience, so that, despite the third person narration, we have remarkably little historical or political context for her decisions and actions. The reader sees the world as Aliide sees it, a perspective whose only contrasts are located in a series of fictional documents inserted by the author into the narrative at various points, and in the narrative centred on Zara's experiences in the 1990s. The book's five parts, constructed of short chapters arranged in non-chronological order, are intercalated with pages from a diary kept by Hans while in hiding from the communist authorities, with the final part being made up of files from an unnamed branch of the secret police (presumably the Soviet NKWD) from 1946 to 1951. Whereas this final section reveals information about the post-war period which none of the characters is party to in its entirety, and which therefore adds further context for the reader to re-assess what has happened, Hans' diary entries almost comically point out the mis-perceptions which characterise Aliide's assessment of her situation. For example, whereas our first glimpse of Hans before the war is shown through the eyes of Aliide's, who sees him surrounded by 'sunshine' and 'bright light' (Oksanen, 2010: 115), Aliide herself remains unaware of Hans' contempt for her, which he hides only because he later depends on her for his survival (113). From the very beginning of the family's story in 1936, her only goal is to

be with Hans and to usurp her sister's place is his affections. The only attention she pays to the world outside the village and the wider political situation is directed by Hans, when he asks her to protect Ingel during his absence after the Soviet invasion in 1940 as he goes to hide in the woods: 'Aliide couldn't betray Hans' trust, she had to be worthy of him. That's why she started to follow the news of the war from Finland with sharp eyes and keen ears, like Hans used to do.' (128) Although she questions Hans about his activities fighting alongside German forces, she has no real sense of what he might have seen and done, which he considers to be 'things [...] that you shouldn't tell to a woman' (226). Equally, although Aliide registers the disappearance of a Jewish family from the village, she does not seem to think it worth questioning the generally held supposition that they have 'escaped to the Soviet Union for safety' (136). In this way, Oksanen emphasises the extent to which Aliide's experience of the world is filtered through her project of winning Hans for herself, to the exclusion of wider political understanding of the history she lives through.

Her commitment to that personal project leads her to become a victim of extreme violence and also a perpetrator of it. It is her refusal to give the authorities details of Hans' whereabouts after the establishment of the ESSR in 1940 that leads to her interrogation and (the text implies) rape in 1947 (151-153). This scene, which occurs not quite at the mid-point of the novel, can be said to be central to the story in a number of senses. Firstly, it establishes a motive for Aliide's later marriage to Estonian

communist Martin Truu. As the reader later learns, Aliide's identification of Martin as a man who can provide her with protection is deeply ironic, given that the secret police documents included in the final section of the book show that he is present in the cellar on the night that Aliide is assaulted (379) and that he provided information which led to her interrogation in the first place (378). Nevertheless, marriage to Martin later provides Aliide with a sense that she will be protected from such violence in the future, and also that nobody will suspect what has happened to her if she is married to a communist: 'No one would dare, because she was Martin Truu's wife, she was a respectable woman.' (168) Although Aliide believes she can recognise other women who have similarly suffered sexual violence, her efforts are directed towards maintaining her distance from them rather than establishing any kind of solidarity with them (168). From the very beginning of the narrative, Aliide experiences the world as essentially hostile and her existence in it as vulnerable in Judith Butler's sense (2004: 150). This basic fact of her relationship to her environment is captured in Oksanen's use of the symbol of the fly, which first appears when Aliide and Ingel meet Hans for the first time outside the church. Losing control of the situation to her sister, Aliide experiences the world as overpowering: 'The heel of her shoe dug into the earth again and again, but the earth betrayed her, the spruce trees gave way, the grass slid under her, the stones rolled away under her feet, and a horsefly flew into her mouth' (116). The reappearance of the fly during the interrogation in the cellar, when Aliide has a bag over her head and is tied up,

re-emphasises this fear of loss of control, which is also echoed in the older Aliide's domestic habits as portrayed at the beginning of the novel: In the opening pages, we find her hunting down a fly that has made its way into her kitchen, and which she experiences as a threat to the order she has created in the house. This order is also expressed by the constant bottling and pickling which the elderly Aliide engages in, the aim of which is to achieve self-sufficiency from the hostile external environment. It is worth noting here that Aliide sees 'self-control' (5) as the key to her survival.

From the above, it should be clear that political matters are very much subordinated to personal concerns in Aliide's life. Although she is undoubtedly tortured and humiliated by the Soviet authorities, her refusal to betray Hans to them is not motivated by support of his political cause or feelings of Estonian nationalism, but by her desire to win him back from her sister, Ingel. By taking control of Hans' situation, Aliide hopes to reverse the power relationship between her and her older sister, who seems incapable of negotiating the complex new political situation. Whereas the narrative begins with Ingel's humiliation of Aliide, who is also constantly reminded of her inferior domestic skills by her sister, after the Soviet invasion Aliide sees Ingel as the hopeless one: 'What a stupid girl. Aliide didn't understand how Hans could have chosen a woman like her.' (140) Similarly, her collaboration with the new Soviet regime places her in a position of power over others in the community, which not only means that they will not regard her as a victim of the political system, but that they must also learn to fear her. The

exhilaration she feels, for example, after she learns that Ingel and Linda are to be deported is symptomatic of this need to dominate others as an antidote to her own vulnerability. Here she fantasises that she could consign the Roosipuu family, with whom she and Martin are sharing a house at the time, to the same fate as her sister and niece.

A sudden, shameful joy spread through her chest. She was alive. She had survived. Her name wasn't on the lists. No one could bear false witness against her, not against Martin's wife, but she could send away the Roosipuu to where Estonian soil was just a faraway memory. (186)

She then returns to the house and threatens the family with denunciation if they do not remove their picture of Jesus from the bedroom wall. It is only at the end of the novel that we discover the full extent of Aliide's need to dominate others, when the secret police documents reveal that, far from merely hearing of the news of Ingel and Linda's deportation, Aliide has in fact been instrumental in their being removed, presumably in order to achieve exclusive access to Hans (383). The codename which has been chosen for Aliide in her work for the secret police is highly significant here: Named 'Agent "Fly"', Aliide's desire for mastery over others is linked here, through reference to the symbolism of the fly discussed above, to her sense of her own

vulnerability. This move on her part chimes with concerns expressed in different contexts by both Butler and Enns that, despite the dominant conception of the victim as a figure whose suffering leads to a kind of moral elevation and insight, those who have suffered violence can seek to remedy their sense of vulnerability through recourse to violence and domination of others.

In Aliide's case, this extends to a sense of disgust towards fellow victims, whose vulnerability is seen as potentially contaminating, whether it is expressed in the visible fear of other women who have been assaulted, or in the traumatic symptoms of her niece, Linda. Linda's fate is particularly disturbing since she is both a victim like Aliide and arguably Aliide's victim, in that Aliide submits to torturing Linda herself rather than betray Hans. Clearly, the situation portrayed is highly ambiguous from an ethical point of view: The choice between betraying Hans and torturing Linda is one produced by the oppressive political regime, and the fact of Aliide's having to choose between these two horrific outcomes therefore reveals above all the brutality of the system. Yet, as in the examples of Levi's and Brent's stories discussed above, Aliide nevertheless remains a moral agent in this situation. Furthermore, her ultimate choice is motivated by her personal desire to finally win Hans from her sister. It is for that reason only that she wants to keep him alive, and for that reason only that she chooses Linda's pain over his. Finally, Linda comes to represent not an object of sympathy or identification for Aliide, but rather symbolises her own vulnerable body, a body from which she wishes to

disassociate herself: 'She didn't want to touch that creature, and she was disgusted; she detested her own body and Linda's body and the thin, waxy coating that had appeared on her skin.' (180)

This dissociation from one's own body is also a key element of the interrogation scene in the cellar, a fact which further emphasises the importance of this moment for the development of the narrative. Aliide survives her mistreatment through an out-of-body experience, in which she at first becomes a 'mouse, in the corner of the room', then a 'fly [...] walking over a woman's naked breast' (151). Aliide ceases to identify with 'the woman' who is herself and thereby also ceases to identify with other victims, for whom she can only feel contempt. This situation changes, however, when she encounters her great-niece, Zara, who she finds lying in the rain outside her house in 1992. Zara's fear allows Aliide to experience her own fear for the first time, breaking through the defences she has built up against it:

Good god, how her body remembered that feeling, remembered it so well that she caught the feeling as soon as she saw it in a stranger's eyes. [...] Aliide's ability to fear was something that should have belonged to the past. [...] But now, when an unknown girl was in her kitchen spreading the fear from her bare skin onto Aliide's oilcloth, she couldn't brush it away like she ought to have done. (79)

Zara's experience of sexual exploitation by Pasha and Lavrenti during her time in Berlin, which involves rape by the former of the two men, forced prostitution and forced participation in the filming of pornography, is described in shocking detail in the novel. At the same time, Oksanen reveals parallels between Aliide's response to torture and Zara's to sexual abuse. Zara becomes the object of the desire of others, losing her identity to the fictional figure of the prostitute 'Natasha,' whose role she plays for her customers (72–73). However, this enforced estrangement from her own body and her own name also becomes a means by which Zara can survive. So, for example, when she is shown one of the videos that Pasha has made of her, she is able to feel that 'the video was not Zara's story but Natasha's; it would never be Zara's story. Natasha's story was on the video. Zara's was someplace else.' (237) This ability to see her body as something alien finally allows her to commit the act of violence which secures her freedom, when she murders a rich client:

She had been made to look at her own body so much that it was strange to her.

Maybe a strange body worked better than her own body in some situations.

Maybe that is why it had gone so well. (279)

Here Zara experiences, in a way that Aliide does not seem to do, the ambivalence of a

self-alienated position which allows sufficient emotional detachment to be able to do violence to others. It is hard to imagine any reader regarding the odious client to be in any way Zara's victim, and Oksanen portrays him as both physically repulsive and sadistic to underline this. Nevertheless, her determination to survive both through a dis-identification with her own suffering and the use of violence against others allows her to be seen as a parallel figure to Aliide. What is striking, however, is that Aliide's exposure to Zara's fear, her recognition of their common experience of abuse and helplessness, translates in this case not into contempt for the weaker figure on Aliide's part, or an attempt to distance herself from that weakness in order to preserve her own invulnerability, but rather into a desire to protect the younger woman and an experience of solidarity with her.

This shift in Aliide's attitude is not immediate. Indeed, as late in the narrative as Pasha and Lavrenti's arrival in the village, Aliide's feelings towards Zara oscillate between identification and revulsion at her weakness:

Had she looked like that back then? Had she held an arm in from of her breasts, been frightened by trivial things, looked wildly about at every sudden noise? Her stomach turned with disgust at the girl again. (300)

However, after Pasha and Lavrenti have shown Aliide pornographic pictures of Zara,

Aliide achieves identification with her great-niece when she imagines what it would be like for Zara if people back home saw the images, clearly over-laying Zara's predicament with her own fear of being recognised as a victim in her own community:

‘And you would never know, when you passed those people on the street, if they had seen those pictures. They would look at you, and you would never know if you'd been recognized. They would be laughing among themselves and looking in your direction, and you wouldn't know if they were talking about you.’

Aliide shut her mouth. What was she talking about? The girl stared at her.
(336)

In terms of the chronology of the narrative, it is immediately following this moment of identification that Aliide shoots Pasha and Lavrenti as they return to her house, providing Zara with the money they are carrying for her to return home. The end of the narrative, when Aliide remains behind and plans to burn the house while she lies next to Hans' body under the floorboards, is not a neat resolution in the sense that Aliide's self-sacrifice may also be interpreted as a resignation in the face of a history of brutality, which merely seems to repeat itself: ‘there would always be chrome-tanned boots, some new boots would arrive, the same or different, but a boot on your neck nevertheless’

(325). At the same time, however, we see Aliide able to relinquish her long-standing response to victimhood, namely that of a defensive subjectivity which seeks to hold the chaotic outside world at bay by any means available, and by resorting to violence against or rejection of the similarly vulnerable where necessary. It should also be noted that this 'dis-identification', as Butler terms it, has gone hand-in-hand with Aliide's commitment to the communist cause. What begins as a pragmatic move to protect herself from denunciation clearly becomes a source of identification for her, which places her in the category of 'good Communist' (107), even after the regime has fallen. This allows her both to see who suffer under the regime as morally culpable, i.e. not 'good Communists' like herself, and simultaneously frees her from the need to interrogate her own behaviour to those she has harmed.

This experience of the victim becoming the perpetrator is by no means confined to Aliide's biography. The same is also the case, as we discover in the final section of the book, for her husband, Martin Truu, who, while also having been complicit in Aliide's rape, is motivated to collaborate with the NKWD in order to rehabilitate himself after his contact with his Western émigré brother is discovered (363). Nevertheless, like Aliide, he eventually becomes highly committed to the regime. Even Zara must at times become complicit with her abusers to survive, watching other girls being herded into a truck before she rides with Pasha and Lavrenti in their limousine, at her suggestion, into Estonia.

Oksanen's novel therefore arguably blurs the distinction between victims and perpetrators in such a way as to destabilise any Estonian national identity based on the notion of a shared righteous victimhood. Far from drawing a binary distinction between Soviet baddies and Estonian goodies, as critics of the novel have averred, the suffering of Estonians is shown not to translate automatically into noble resistance, but is rather shown to undermine their solidarity with each other in the struggle for individual survival. While this might be read as a kind of victim-blaming, it is also significant in terms of the way in which it undermines contemporary Estonian nationalist narratives of heroic Estonian resistance and victimhood, which blot out any consideration of Estonian culpability, not least in relation to the Holocaust, but also in terms of their accommodation with the Soviet regime. While the suffering of individual Estonians is shown in Oksanen's novel, primarily in the case of Aliide, the possibility of a community of suffering bound together by shared 'pure' victim status, setting them apart from Russians as a perpetrator group, is thrown into doubt. In this sense, it is problematic to read Oksanen's as a nationalist text, a point of view also undermined by the portrayal of Hans Pekk, who we learn has murdered Martin Truu's brother. Unlike the acts of violence in which Martin or, indeed, Aliide are complicit, it is difficult to explain Hans' actions in terms of his own victimhood. Rather, it seems to be purely ideologically motivated: 'A Communist. I strangled him.' (359) The fact that Martin's brother is a hunted, confused and dishevelled figure, on the run from the new Soviet

regime himself, further casts a negative light on Hans' violence. Structuring his thinking about the world according to fixed categories of moral victims (Estonian nationalists) and immoral perpetrators (communists) allows him to kill Martin's brother without recognising their shared condition of vulnerability across ideological lines at this time of political upheaval.

The kind of solidarity which the novel does seem to support, however, is one based on an 'apprehension of a common human vulnerability', as Judith Butler puts it (2004: 30). We see this in the developing relationship between Zara and Aliide, in which Aliide is able to give up her dis-identification with her own former suffering and with others who suffer in order to act in a way which shows solidarity with Zara (a Russian), recognising the commonalities of their experience despite the different time-frames and the different causes: In Zara's case it is a particularly brutal form of capitalism, not communism, which is to blame; although both women do, of course, have their experience of oppressive patriarchal structures in common. Aliide does this even at the cost of giving up her own sense of invulnerability in both a literal and a metaphorical sense: She not only puts herself in harm's way for Zara, but is also able to acknowledge the parallels between their experiences and acknowledge her own status as a moral agent by recognising her past wrongs. Aliide's response to Zara can be understood in terms of what Michael Rothberg has called 'multidirectional memory', that is to say a form of memory in which victims see the recognition of their suffering not as excluding

the representation of the suffering of others, but rather as part of a complex pattern of oppression in which parallels can be drawn between different historical constellations, without making those constellations interchangeable or creating a hierarchy among them. By recognizing these inter-relationships, Rothberg argues, victims can move from an exclusive focus on their own suffering, at the expense of paying attention to the plight of others, to a situation where they become sensitised to their responsibility for those others (Rothberg, 209: 265).

In contrast, Oksanen criticises the emergence of a revived nationalism in the Estonia of the late 1980s and early 1990s, making repeated reference to local thugs who use patriotism as a pretext for their attacks on Aliide as a former communist or ‘tibia’ (Russkie) (83), as they write on her door. The paradox of the situation is that those young Estonians who now style themselves as victims of communist oppression (singing ‘*it’s time [...] to throw off our own slavery*’, 88) threaten a woman whose affiliation to the communist cause was a matter of self-defence faced with her own brutalisation. The young nationalists bolster their own sense of identity by aggression towards a supposed foe, while denying the vulnerability of the individual attacked. An acknowledgement of common vulnerability across ethnic or ideological lines, not to mention a recognition one’s own nation’s implication in past wrongs, would make the binary of victim and perpetrator untenable, but this insight is warded off by their othering of Aliide in racial terms.

This is not to suggest, however, that the novel proposes the exculpation of all of those vulnerable to victimization in the new political system. Oksanen also shows how other Estonians implicated in torture during the 1940s and 1950s seek to style themselves as victims of both the old and the new order, protesting when prosecuted that they were 'just following orders' (91). Here, Oksanen criticises those who fail to face up to their own complicity in violence and who adopt a self-defensive victim role, unable to emphasise with their own victims. Furthermore, by ending with the final revelations of Aliide's complicity not only in her family's deportation, but also in the arrest of two of Hans' nationalist partisan colleagues (384), Oksanen does not allow her protagonist to be released from responsibility for these crimes. What the author does demonstrate, however, is that nationalist discourses of righteous victimhood obscure histories of human vulnerability and moral fallibility which might provide the basis of a form of solidarity which is not founded on exclusion and an unwillingness to address the complex relationship between suffering and culpability in the national past.

Conclusion

Sofi Oksanen's *Purge* allows the reader to engage in an analysis of the position of the victims of historical political violence which refuses to portray them as 'moral beacons.' In line with recent scholarship on victimhood (as in the work by Bouris, Enns and

Butler cited above), Oksanen shows how the experience of violence and suffering can also lead to problematic moral choices, making the victims of violence complicit with the very brutalisation they themselves have suffered. The text offers some hope in the form of a recognition of shared vulnerability across boundaries of nationality and ideology, and the construction of a 'multidirectional memory' in Rothberg's terms, towards which Aliide is able to move at the end of the narrative. However, the possibility of new forms of solidarity on such a basis, as Butler and Rothberg would hope, remains tentative from the point of view of the perspectives offered by the novel itself: After all, the novel ends with Zara removing herself back to Russia and Aliide planning to put an end to her life, while nationalist ideology, with its self-righteous claim to 'pure' victimhood, continues to gain the upper hand. What *Purge* certainly does reject, however, is the re-founding of a nationalist community based on the clear division between noble victims and nefarious perpetrators. For this reason, it represents a valuable contribution to the critical interrogation of the political mobilisation of the notion of victimhood in the contemporary world.

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